

# What to do when Receiving Radiation Therapy to the Pelvis (Rectal or Anal Cancers)



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**This pamphlet will give you information about what to expect while receiving radiation therapy for rectal cancer or anal canal cancer.**

This pamphlet will give you information about what to expect while receiving radiation therapy for rectal cancer or anal canal cancer.

Many patients receive radiation therapy without major side effects. This pamphlet may help you manage possible side effects, or reduce possible symptoms from your treatment. Your radiation oncologist, oncology nurse and radiation therapist will provide you with care, support and information during your course of treatment.

Please ask any questions that you may have when you come for treatment each day. Your radiation therapists will answer your questions or refer you to other members of your health care team. Also, you may bring your questions to your doctor or oncology nurse at your weekly radiation treatment review appointment.

If you speak very little or no English, we can arrange for interpretation as needed. Please let us know as soon as possible that you need help with interpretation.

The following pages include the main preparation steps in Radiation Therapy and information on how to manage side effects.

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## **1. The CT Simulation Appointment**

### **How long is this appointment?**

About 1 to 2 hours.

### **Where do I go?**

Please check in at the reception desk on level 1B (1 below main floor). Your photograph will be taken to help us identify you during your course of treatment.

### **What is the procedure about?**

The radiation oncologist and radiation therapist will use a computed tomography (CT) simulator to determine the area of treatment. A CT simulator is an x-ray machine with special computer software that gives the team detailed images of the body.

### **Is any preparation needed?**

- You do not need to have the same preparation as you had for a diagnostic CT scan, but you may need to prepare for the CT simulation scan.
- Come 1 hour before the CT scan to have a drink of a clear liquid diluted in water that helps us see the bowel on the scan.
- Have a full bladder for the scan. Drink 500mL of water 1 hour before the CT scan. After the scan you can empty your bladder.
- When the area for treatment is determined, we will place marks on your skin. As these marks can wear off, we will need to give you small permanent tattoo marks using a fine sterile needle.

The radiation therapists will explain these procedures to you before any procedure is done. Please ask any questions you may have. If you speak little or no English, interpretation can be arranged. Please let the radiation therapists know if you need help with interpretation.

After the CT scan you will need to have a magnetic resonance image (MRI) scan as part of your planning for radiation. A radiation treatment plan, based on the scans, will then be prepared that is tailored to you.

## 2. The Radiation Therapy Appointments

### Is any preparation needed?

- Yes, you will need to have a full bladder for treatment each day.
- Please refer to the pamphlet “**Getting ready for treatment - Radiation therapy to the pelvis for patients with rectal or anal canal cancers**”

### How long is the treatment?

- On most days you will be in the treatment room for about 15 to 25 minutes, but the radiation beam will only be on for a short amount of this time.
- The first day on the treatment unit may take extra time because the radiation therapists, and other members of the team, will be checking every part of the treatment plan.
- The radiation therapists will take some x-ray pictures every day during your course of treatment with the treatment machine. These x-ray pictures will be used to make sure that your treatment is given exactly as it was planned.

### Where do I go?

Please check in at the reception desk on level 2B (2 floors below the main floor). If you are having chemotherapy on the same day as your radiation therapy, we will give you an appointment to go to the Chemo Daycare Clinic also.

During the course of treatment, you will meet your doctor or nurse case manager once a week to check your progress and/or speak with you about any concerns or questions you may have. These visits are called **treatment review visits**.

## 3. Radiation Side Effects

Radiation side effects are different from person to person. These side effects depend on:

- The parts of the body being treated
- The amount of radiation given
- The person’s general health

### Will the radiation affect my bowel?

Irritation of the bowels by radiation may cause stomach cramps, soft or loose stools and increased frequency of stools or diarrhea. This is usually most noticeable after 2 or 3 weeks of treatment. Inflammation of the rectum or anal canal, if included in the treatment area, can also happen. If at anytime you have more difficulty having a bowel movement or ongoing stomach pain, call your radiation therapist, nurse case manager or doctor.

### **What to do if you have diarrhea?**

- Have small, frequent meals instead of larger meals.
- Drink lots of fluids so that you make up for the fluid you lose from diarrhea and to stop dehydration. Most people should have at least 8 to 10 cups of fluids a day.
- For more information, ask your radiation therapists or nurse case manager for the “**Eating Hints for People with Diarrhea**” information pamphlet.
- Change the food you are eating if you get diarrhea or loose bowel movements. We can arrange an appointment with the dietitian for more advice on your diet and nutritional needs if the pamphlet does not help.
- You can take medications to relieve the diarrhea. Your radiation oncologist will talk to you about these medications.
- To relieve any skin irritation around the anus, a sitz bath can be soothing and help with discomfort. Pamphlets are available from your nurse case manager or radiation therapist.

### **Will the radiation affect my bladder?**

Some patients may have changes to their bladder habits such as a need to pass urine often or with little warning. Other side effects may include a burning or a painful sensation and difficulty passing urine. These symptoms may be due to inflammation of the bladder (cystitis). Urinary infections are not common but can happen during pelvic radiotherapy.

#### **What to do:**

- Drink lots of fluids during the day.
- Drink less fluid after dinner in the evening, to help avoid getting up through the night.
- Try to reduce or stop drinking caffeinated drinks such as coffee and tea.
- Speak to your nurse case manager and doctor as medications can be prescribed to help relieve these side effects. Your doctor may ask that you give a urine sample to make sure you do not have an infection.

### **Will the radiation make me more tired?**

Fatigue or having less energy is a common side effect, especially after 3 to 4 weeks of treatment. You may feel even more fatigue if you are also having chemotherapy.

### **What to do:**

- Get all the rest you need
- Eat well-balanced meals and drink plenty of fluids (8 to 10 cups per day)
- You can stay active - but don't overdo it
- Pace your activities
- Continue enjoyable activities such as short walks, music, reading and other hobbies
- Ask family/friends to help with chores and other daily activities

### **Will the radiation affect my appetite?**

Some patients may lose interest in food while receiving treatment. Certain medications such as chemotherapy and pain medications can also cause loss of appetite.

### **What to do if you experience a decrease in appetite:**

- Light exercise and fresh air may help your appetite.
- Try to eat snacks every few hours rather than relying on feeling hungry as a signal to eat.
- Make every mouthful count by taking foods that are high in calories and protein.
- Eat foods that you enjoy.
- Make the food interesting and appealing. Be creative with your meals (e.g. have breakfast for dinner).
- Eat more during the time of day when your appetite is best.
- Drink plenty of fluids and aim for 8 to 10 cups of fluids per day. This does not just have to be water, broths or herbal tea. You can also drink more milk, cream soups, juice or milkshakes.
- Speak to your radiation therapist or nurse case manager for more information.
- An appointment with a dietician can be arranged for you and your family to determine which foods best meets your needs.

### **Will radiation affect my skin?**

Some patients may see changes in the skin where the treatment is given.

A change in colour of the skin can happen during treatment. This is usually most noticeable in the skin between the thighs or around the anus. These areas may feel dry, tender or itchy. Some patients notice some peeling or blistering of the skin. If you suffer from hemorrhoids, this reaction and other side effects such as diarrhea can sometimes make them worse. Please read the pamphlet called "**Caring for your Skin in the groin and rectal areas**".

### **Are there other side effects?**

In general, the more common side effects are those we have described. But, in some cases, these side effects may develop:

- Rarely, there may be some blood passed in the urine or stool
- Rarely, bleeding from the vagina can occur

Please tell your radiation therapists, nurse case manager or doctor if you have any of these side effects. Some of these treatment side effects can be similar to the symptoms you are having from your illness.

### **4. What to do when the treatment is finished**

- The treatment side effects mentioned are temporary and should start to get better 1 to 2 weeks after the treatment is over. You can slowly begin your normal skin care routines at this time.
- A final treatment review appointment with your radiation oncologist will be set up during your last week of treatment. A follow up appointment to see your doctor in the clinic will be arranged at this time.
- Please visit the Patient and Family Library (Main Floor) for more information and resources related to your treatment.

**PMH Patient & Family Library**

**Tel: 416-946-2000 ext.5383, Main floor**

**Website: [www.uhnpatienteducation.ca](http://www.uhnpatienteducation.ca)**

**Email address: [patienteducationpmh@uhn.on.ca](mailto:patienteducationpmh@uhn.on.ca)**